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Aspirant candidate behaviour and progressive political ambition

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Abstract

In this paper we take account of the role of aspirant candidate behaviour in progressive political ambition, specifically how some individuals signal their political ambition to political actors by approaching them to discuss running for office. We examine how the effect of this behaviour compares to the more prominently studied effect of elite recruitment. We conclude that signalling behaviour by an aspirant candidate has a substantial effect, particularly with regard to actually acting on initial considerations of whether to stand, and that elite recruitment makes a difference but only in conjunction with the aspirant candidate themselves signalling their ambition to political actors.

Keywords

Political ambition, political recruitment, progressive ambition, signalling

Introduction

In many significant ways politicians do not resemble the overall populations from which they are drawn. Thanks to existing research, we know, for example, that politicians are more likely to be male (Lawless and Fox, 2010; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995), white, wealthy, highly-educated and to have held certain professional occupations than the average member of society (Carnes, 2013). One explanation for these patterns is that political elites are more likely to encourage the kinds of candidates they want to see running for office to do so (Broockman, 2014). This idea of recruitment, or mobilisation, has also been put forward as a possible remedy for these varying kinds of political unrepresentativeness, working on the evidence-based assumption that an effective method of getting individuals from traditionally under-represented groups to run for political office at any level is simply to ask them to do so (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu, 2013; Lawless and Fox, 2010; Moncrief et al., 2001). David Broockman (2014: 109) writes, 'having been asked to run [is] the modal explanation for candidacy or the factor most positively associated with interest in running'. Evidence on whether this effect holds in the case of progressive political ambition, where incumbent legislators consider whether to run for higher office, is mixed, with previous research highlighting the added importance of strategic and electoral concerns relating to the political opportunity structure facing a prospective candidate in line with classic rational choice approaches (Maestas et al., 2006; Schlesinger, 1966).

However, existing work is less clear on the effect that the behaviour of aspirant candidates themselves has on progressive political ambition relative to being recruited; the possibility that the behaviour of aspirant candidates might itself be correlated with both being recruited in the first instance, and correlated with that appeal consequently being successful and resulting in the individual running for higher office. Although this can be explored through the use of experimental approaches (Broockman, 2014; Preece and Stoddard, 2015; Preece et al., 2016), data collected from incumbent legislators on their progressive ambition is often observational. Here, we use observational data to explore how recruitment appeals affect the political ambition of incumbent sub-national legislators, specifically asking whether recruitment effects hold having controlled for the behaviour of aspirant candidates themselves. Breaking down the process of running for higher office, we find that

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signalling behaviour by the prospective candidate increases the likelihood of them entering the selection process for higher office, but does not affect the likelihood of them being successful in this endeavour. We conclude, like other recent research in this area, that targeted elite recruitment alone might not be enough to increase the diversity of the candidate pool for national political office (Preece et al., 2016). Why does this identification of the importance of candidate signalling matter? Practically, it means that the efforts of political parties to reverse the under-representation of certain groups might be less effective than is currently thought: recruitment appeals might simply be tapping in to an already-existing well of political ambition that was generated independently of them. Theoretically, it follows that academic research on political ambition might also be looking at the question of why some are more ambitious than others in the wrong way – instead of focusing solely on issues of structure and recruitment, a greater focus on underlying psychological dispositions and the role of discriminatory politico-social networks might be called for.

Data and methods

We utilise original data collected via an online survey available between February and May 2014 from incumbent local legislators (termed local councillors in the UK) in London, United Kingdom.[1] Data was collected ahead of the May 2014 London local elections at which all electoral wards would be contested. A personalised link to the survey was emailed to 1804 legislators from 32 different London councils at the email address on their official webpages. We received 420 responses and 395 were complete, a valid response rate of 22%.

London is a useful case to focus on when exploring progressive ambition. Local legislators in London differ from their colleagues in the rest of the UK: they are younger, more likely to be women, less likely to be white and less likely to be retired (and thus more likely to hold additional occupations) (Kettlewell and Phillips, 2014). Additionally, London is the political centre of the United Kingdom. Proximity to the UK Parliament at Westminster will afford local legislators greater proximity to national party organisations based in the city as well as opportunities to work in national-level political-focused occupations. Our sample is representative of London legislators as a whole in terms of party, sex and ethnicity (Kettlewell and Phillips, 2014). Although, as with all case studies, our results may not generalise to sub-national legislators everywhere, we expect there to be a substantial number of individuals in our sample who are progressively ambitious in some way, increasing our ability to explore the underlying phenomenon in question.

Our measure of political ambition comprises four categories that account for whether a legislator has expressed no interest in running for higher office, has considered running for office but has not acted on it, or has actually acted on their intention by either entering a candidate selection process or standing as a parliamentary candidate: 42% of respondents had not considered running for higher office, whilst 30% had expressed an intention to run and considered higher office and a further 28% had taken some action towards actually doing so.[2]

Our variable of interest seeks to distinguish individuals who were solely recruited by political actors from those who signalled their ambition by approaching a political actor regarding their running for higher office, and from those who both approached and were recruited. We compare these categories against the reference category who were neither recruited nor signallers. We control for a range of demographic variables, including sex, age, ethnicity, marital and parental status and personality traits as measured on the Big Five scale (Dietrich et al., 2012; Lawless and Fox, 2010). We also control for the political socialisation of prospective candidates, including their family backgrounds and early-life engagement with politics (Lawless, 2012) as well as non-legislative political experience, for example as Congressional staffers or in other 'instrumental' political occupations (Hernsson, 1994).[3] Full details of survey items, and more information on the sample, are available in the Appendix (see Supplementary material online).

Model results: progressive ambition among incumbent local legislators

How important to the expression of political ambition is being recruited by a political actor? Does the signalling of ambition by the prospective candidate through approaching political actors matter more? Or are those individuals who are both signallers *and* recruited more likely to express progressive ambition? To address these questions, we first use a binomial logistic regression model to contrast those who are actively seeking office against those who have not taken active steps to stand (see Table 2). Model 1 includes only the recruited and signaller categorical variable: those recruited only; signallers only; and both recruited and signalled are examined against the base category neither recruited nor signalled. Model 2 explores whether these effects hold after controlling for established predictors of political ambition and other social baseline indicators. Second, we use a multinomial logistic regression to examine progressive ambition in more depth, contrasting those incumbent local legislators who have either entered the selection process, have actually stood for parliamentary office or who have no intention of standing against those individuals who have considered standing but not acted on it (see Table 3). We follow the same format as in Table 2, with Model 1 focusing only on recruitment and approaching political actors and Model 2 examining whether such effects hold once other covariates are included. All model fit statistics operate in the expected direction with

reductions in the log-likelihood and the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) evident from Model 1 to Model 2.

Before the models, Table 1 provides a descriptive comparison of respondents falling across the four categories of progressive ambition. Confirming existing findings, there is a negative relationship between being female and progressive ambition. Of those who entered a selection process, fewer than 35% were women, declining to just over 25% of those who stood for election. More than 20% of non-white legislators had entered the selection process, but of those who stood for election, fewer than 8% were non-white compared to 12% in the overall sample. There is some evidence to suggest that individuals who had been employed in instrumental occupations were more likely to have entered the selection process or stood as a parliamentary candidate. Similarly, there is also evidence that individuals who exhibit emotional stability, and whose parents were heavily politically involved, are more likely to have stood in an election.

More than 60% of those who had not considered standing were neither recruited nor signallers, and just under a third were solely recruited by political actors. More than 20% of those who had entered the selection process were individuals who signalled their ambition by approaching a relevant political actor while more than 60% had both approached and been recruited. A similar number of those who actually stood as a candidate had both signalled to, and been recruited by, a political actor.[4]

Based on existing findings in this area, we might expect sex to have a notable influence on levels of progressive ambition, and on the interplay of elite recruitment and decision-making. Of those who had been recruited by political actors, just under half were women. Fewer than 40% of individuals who had both signalled and been recruited were women, compared to just over 25% of those who signalled their ambition by approaching a relevant political actor. Around a fifth of the 40% of women who had both signalled and been recruited had stood as a parliamentary candidate. Our data suggests that more women were recruited by political actors than men, and that a slightly higher percentage of men signalled their ambition by approaching a political actor than women. Whilst this is not entirely conclusive, there seems to be some circumstantial evidence that women are recruited more than men, perhaps reflecting recent party efforts to increase women's representation in political institutions. However, this does not seem equally true of ethnicity. Notwithstanding the caveat of relatively low numbers, just over 22% of those who signalled their ambition were non-white compared to 11.2% who were recruited. A similar number were both recruited and had signalled their ambition. Comparing non-whites and whites, only 9% of whites signalled their ambition compared to around 19% of non-whites, while slightly more whites were recruited by political actors than non-whites. Relative to their overall presence in the sample, it seems reasonably clear that more minority ethnic than majority ethnic local legislators are signallers, something that should be explored in future research.

The findings in Model 1, Table 2 suggest that those who signalled their ambition and those who were both recruited and signallers were significantly more likely to actively seek to stand for public office when compared against the base category not approached nor recruited. Signallers were 9.7 times more likely to actively seek to stand whereas those who were both signallers and recruited were nearly 13 times more likely. Yet there was no similar effect for those who were just recruited by political actors alone. Such individuals were not significantly more likely to actively seek to stand than those who were neither signallers nor recruited. Do these results hold when other established indicators of political ambition are taken in account? We present the full results in Model 2. Holding all variables constant, signallers were 10 times more likely to actively seek to stand. However, individuals who were both recruited and also signallers increased their odds of actively seeking to run by a magnitude of 13.6. To ease interpretation, we estimate the discrete change on the probability for each of the values averaged across the observed values.[5] These average marginal effects (AMEs) are graphically illustrated in Figure 1. We calculate the baseline probability of actively seeking office if all independent variables are set on their empirical mean. The predicted probability equals 1.9 percentage points. This helps us to evaluate the impact of each of the indicators because we can compare the respective effect to the baseline probability. On average, the probability of signallers actively seeking to stand is 30% higher than the reference category which is being neither a signaller nor recruited by political actors. Being both a signaller and being recruited had a slightly larger effect. On average, such individuals were 34% more likely to stand. Recruitment was therefore influential only where an individual had also signalled their interest in running for higher office to political actors. Recruitment alone did not have a significant influence on individuals actively seeking to stand (compared to those who were neither signallers nor recruited). Of the remaining predictors, well-established drivers of progressive ambition were significant. There is also evidence of a sex effect, with the odds of women actively seeking higher office being 2.8 times smaller than those of men, a statistically significant difference. On average, the probability of women actively standing for public office is fourteen percentage points lower than it is for men. Finally, those aged under 40 are on average sixteen percentage points less likely to stand than those aged between 40 and 59.

When does signalling or being recruited actually matter? Are they key drivers of whether an individual actually acts on their consideration to stand for public office by entering the selection process? And when compared against those who have not taken active steps, are they the major drivers among those legislators who have actually stood for

Table 1. Socio-economic, socialisation, barriers to running, personality traits, etc. characteristics of progressive ambition (percentages).

Variables	Not considered standing	Considered standing	Entered selection process	Stood for election	Overall sample
Socio-economic					
Female	51.2	35.6	34.5	25.5	40.8
Married	56.5	55.1	60.3	64.7	57.7
Age under 40	7.7	28.8	13.8	15.7	15.9
Age 40–59	28.0	38.1	55.2	51.0	38.0
Age 60 plus	56.0	28.8	27.6	27.5	40.0
Missing age	8.3	4.2	3.4	5.9	6.1
Non-white	11.3	11.0	20.7	7.8	12.2
Degree	62.5	77.1	89.7	88.2	74.2
Live alone	40.5	36.4	27.6	29.4	35.9
Cllr responsible for household tasks	11.9	14.4	19.0	17.6	14.4
Spouse responsible for household tasks	21.4	22.0	39.7	21.6	24.3
Even responsibility for household tasks	26.2	27.1	13.8	31.4	25.3
Children dependent age	11.3	21.2	27.6	29.4	19.0
Socialisation					
Talked politics	63.7	69.5	75.9	68.6	67.8
Grew up in London	44.0	50.0	41.4	35.3	44.3
Parent & family involved in politics					
Party member only	23.8	16.9	29.3	19.6	22.0
Elected office only	7.7	6.8	5.2	5.9	6.8
Both member & elected	7.7	14.4	10.3	17.6	11.4
Barriers running for office (not bothered)					
Spending less time with family/friends	53.6	35.6	46.6	52.9	47.1
Privacy/media intrusion	48.8	39.8	51.7	52.9	47.1
Personal interests	57.1	47.5	55.2	68.6	55.4
Negative impact on occupational goals	63.1	66.9	70.7	72.5	66.6
Occupational experience					
Instrumental occupation	11.9	18.6	25.9	27.5	18.0
Signalled/recruited by political actors					
Not approached/recruited	60.7	22.9	5.2	17.6	35.7
Recruited by political actors only	32.7	20.3	10.3	7.8	22.5
Signalled to political actors only	3.6	12.7	20.7	13.7	10.1
Both signalled & recruited	3.0	44.1	63.8	60.8	31.6
Personality traits (SA)					
Open-minded	29.2	34.7	43.1	37.3	33.9
Conscientious	19.6	13.6	27.6	11.8	18.0
Extraverted	16.7	19.5	27.6	21.6	19.7
Agreeable	23.2	23.7	31.0	19.6	24.1
Emotionally stable	30.4	2.9	31.0	37.3	29.1
N	168	118	58	51	395

parliamentary office? We address these questions using a multinomial logistical regression where considering to stand is the reference category. As before, we use the same format and predictor variables with the key findings

Table 2. Logistic model of progressive ambition of sitting councillors: actively seeking to stand versus not standing.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	SE	β	SE
Constant	−2.37*	0.40	−4.60*	1.29
Signalled/recruited by political actors: base = neither				
Recruited by political actors only	0.31	0.45	0.22	0.47
Signalled to political actors only	2.27*	0.44	2.30*	0.52
Both signalled & recruited	2.55*	0.35	2.61*	0.41
Socio-economic variables				
Female	–		−1.03*	0.37
Degree	–		1.39*	0.42
Non-White	–		0.48	0.48
Age: base = age 40–59				
Age under 40	–		−1.19*	0.42
Age 60 plus	–		−0.19	0.36
Missing age	–		0.26	0.78
Family structures/roles				
Married	–		−0.10	0.47
Dependent children	–		0.17	0.29
Responsibility for household tasks: base = councillor				
Spouse responsible for a majority	–		0.80	0.52
Evenly responsible for a majority	–		−0.02	0.43
Live alone	–		−0.04	0.54
Personality traits				
Open-minded	–		−0.04	0.22
Conscientious	–		0.14	0.14
Extraverted	–		−0.10	0.14
Agreeable	–		−0.20	0.21
Emotionally stable	–		0.43*	0.19
Political socialisation				
Talk politics at home	–		0.24	0.34
Parent/family involved in politics: base = not involved				
Parent/family party member only			0.05	0.36
Parent/family elected office only	–		−0.04	0.70
Parent/family both member & elected	–		0.09	0.51
Socialisation by place				
Grew up in London	–		−0.04	0.31
Barriers to running for office: base = negative perception				
Spending less time with family/friends	–		−0.02	0.35
Loss of privacy/media intrusion	–		0.29	0.34
Less personal interests	–		0.03	0.37
Negative impact on occupational goals	–		0.24	0.39
Occupational experience				
Instrumental occupation	–		0.98*	0.41
Model fit				
Wald Chi-square	74.49*		103.60*	
Log likelihood	−186.15		−162.66	
McFadden's R^2	0.20		0.30	
AIC	380.30		385.31	
N	395		395	

*Significant ⩽ 0.05.

presented in Table 3 (full model results are in Appendix Table A1). Once again, an aspirant candidate signalling their interest in running appears to have a greater effect than being recruited (see Model 1). But crucially, the

Table 3. Multinomial logistic model of progressive ambition (base = considered standing but not acted on it).

	Entered selection		Stood for Parliament		No intention of standing	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Variables (Model 1 without controls)						
Constant	–2.20	0.61	–1.10*	0.38	1.33*	0.22
Signalled/recruited by political actors: base = neither						
Recruited by political actors only	0.81	0.76	–0.69	0.66	–0.50	0.33
Signalled to political actors only	1.97*	0.72	0.34	0.60	–2.25*	0.53
Both signalled & recruited	1.86*	0.65	0.58	0.45	–3.67*	0.52
Model fit						
Wald Chi-square	197.33*		197.33*		197.33*	
Log likelihood	–403.20		–403.20		–403.20	
McFadden's R^2	0.20		0.20		0.20	
AIC	830.40		830.40		830.40	
N	395		395		395	
Variables (Model 2 with controls)						
Constant	−3.80*	1.80	−3.79*	1.81	1.91	1.57
Signalled/recruited by political actors: base = neither						
Recruited by political actors only	0.80	0.80	−0.71	0.70	−0.44	0.36
Signalled to political actors only	1.92*	0.79	0.48	0.68	−2.61*	0.60
Both signalled & recruited	2.09*	0.71	0.70	0.53	−3.80*	0.57
Model fit						
Wald Chi-square	313.78*		313.78*		313.78*	
Log likelihood	–344.97		–344.97		–344.97	
McFadden's R^2	0.31		0.31		0.31	
AIC	869.95		869.95		869.95	
N	395		395		395	

*Significant $\leq$ 0.05.

signalling effect is only present for entering the selection process, not for actually standing for higher office. Similar effects are found for those who have both signalled to, and been recruited by, political actors. These results are robust to the addition of further predictor variables. Compared to those who have not acted but are considering standing, legislators are 6.8 times more likely to enter a selection process if they have signalled their interest in running to a political actor and around 8 times more likely if they have both signalled and been recruited. Those that have solely been recruited are no more likely to have either entered a selection process or actually stood for higher office than those who have experienced neither.

We again examine the average marginal effects to fully assess the impact of these variables (see Figure 2 and Table A2 in the Appendix).[6] On average, the probability that legislators who had signalled their interest to political actors had entered the selection process to stand for higher office increases by 21 percentage points. The probability that those who had both signalled and been recruited entering the selection process increases by 25 percentage points.

Of the remaining predictors, legislators with a degree were 3.2 times more likely to enter the selection process (compared to the base category). The most important driver among those who actually had stood for higher public office, holding all other variables constant, was being a man. The probability of having stood for higher office is on average 11 percentage points lower for women than men. Other variables, including early-life political exposure and socialisation, are insignificant. This suggests that although they may not explain progressive ambition, they might have a more pronounced effect on the decision to seek public office in the first instance.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper explores the effect of aspirant candidate behaviour on progressive political ambition. We find that signalling their ambition by approaching a political actor to discuss running for higher office has a significant effect the likelihood that an aspirant candidate will act on considerations to stand for higher office. Recruitment by a political actor only has a significant effect in combination with such signalling. In conjunction with signalling, being recruited certainly matters, but the signalling of ambition to a political actor by the aspirant candidate is the key driver, something that needs to be explored better in future research in order to identify in detail who the people more likely to

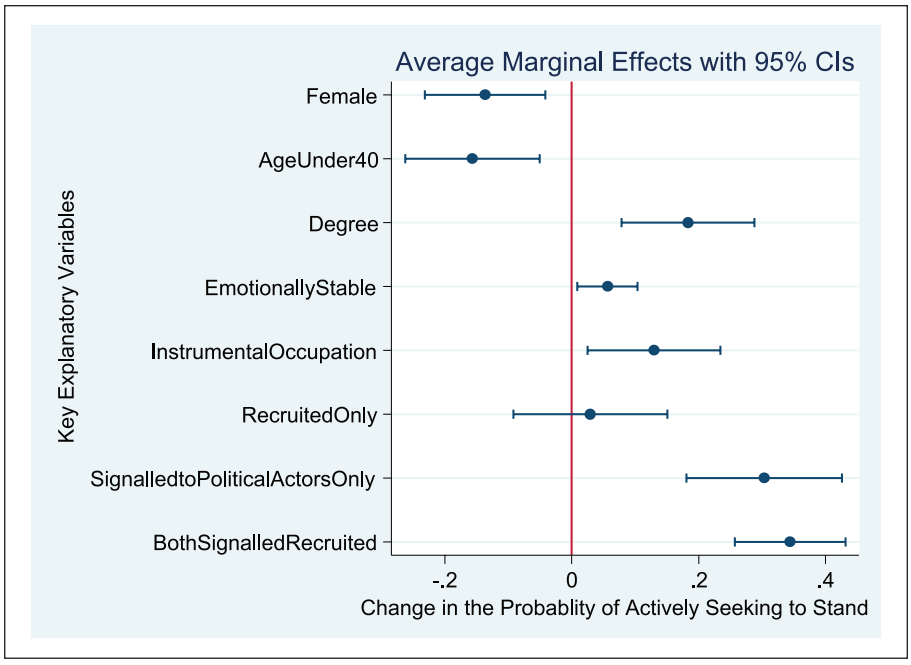

Figure 1. Average marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals of key variables on actively seeking to stand for office.

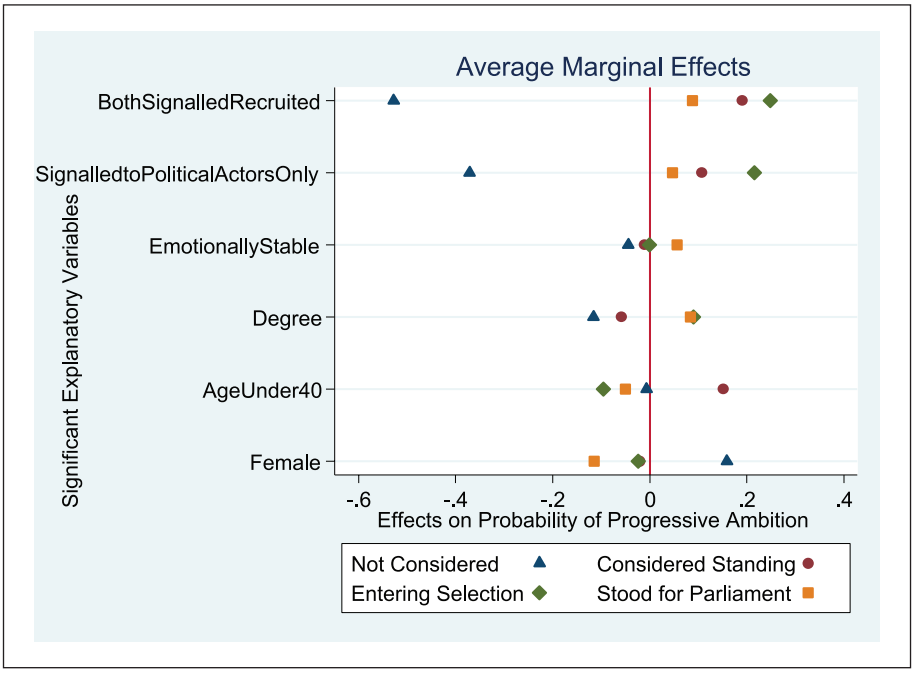

Figure 2. Average marginal effects of key variables on progressive ambition.

undertake signalling behaviour are, why this is the case and what the mechanism in play here actually is. For example, building on Broockman's notion of selective recruitment, self-instigated approaches might be a reaction to not being recruited, a pro-active attempt by an aspirant candidate to put themselves on the radar of potential recruiters. In such a case, signalling interest to a political actor might act as social proof of dedication or could be seen as indicative of the possession of inherent traits that might be considered relevant to a successful candidacy. For those individuals who feel they are not ingratiated into the relevant social networks, something perhaps correlated with membership of traditionally under-represented social groups, signalling might be especially important. Alternatively, it might

simply be that certain patterns of socialisation and/or personality traits are present in individuals who approach political actors. These are just some of the aspects of aspirant candidate behaviour that could be examined in future research. Such research would have important real-world implications: it is generally accepted that an effective way for political parties to increase the number of candidates from traditionally under-represented groups is to go out and recruit them. Our findings here show that this might not be as simple a relationship as first thought.

Our study has limitations. It is possible that those aspirant candidates who undertook signalling behaviour did so because they fully expect to get a positive response. Conversely, it might be that those who were instead recruited were particular types of local legislators who were seen to require a lot of persuasion as it was perceived that would not be interested in running without it. As such, recruitment by political actors might have been used here to persuade them and thus didn't have much success given their underlying negativity to stand. The data we analyse in this paper does not permit us to explore these ideas, but future research should consider them. Additionally, it might be the case that recruitment functions in a different way for progressive ambition than any initial run for office, something that we cannot test here. Finally, owing to our case study approach, it is possible that our findings may be particular to the case of London or the UK, which has a stronger party system than the United States, the focus of much existing research in this area. Interrogating the role of aspirant candidate behaviour in different political contexts would greatly develop understanding on this point. Notwithstanding these limitations, our findings should encourage scholars and practitioners alike to question how the process of candidate mobilisation appears to function.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Supplementary material

The online appendices and replication files are available at http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/2053168017691444 and http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/20HOBW respectively.

Notes

1. It is well-established that sub-national legislative offices provide a pool of eligible candidates to run for higher office (Allen, 2013; Lawless and Fox, 2010; Moncrief et al., 2001). In the United Kingdom, research has found that around a third of all Members of Parliament (MPs) elected since 1945 have had experience in a local legislature prior to their election to the House of Commons (Local Government Association, 2008).
2. Full details of the dependent variable are in the Appendix. This distinction is based on the response category 'Have entered a selection process or otherwise made efforts to run for parliamentary candidacy'. We might expect this to encompass putting one's name forward for a selection process, entering such a process, contesting such a process if shortlisted and so on. Critically, undertaking such activities shows not only intent but also a related action towards the goal of holding higher office.
3. Of course, based on classic contributions to this research area, we might also expect aspirant candidates to adjust their activities in accordance with the political opportunity structure in front of them, namely whether they resided in or close to a district with an open seat or not (Maestas et al., 2006). Although this might seem pertinent, we do not account for this in our analysis for various reasons. Primarily, the UK has a tradition of candidates travelling to contest constituencies that may be far from their current place of residence or where they sit on a local council. In addition, it is common for candidates to 'blood' themselves in seats considered unwinnable for their party as a demonstration of partisan loyalty. As such, it is not clear how we would tie individual legislators to given open or closed districts, especially given the intimate proximity of the 73 constituencies in the Greater London area.
4. For brevity, the percentages of the progressive ambition categories within each category of signalling and recruiting are as follows. For those recruited only, 61.8% did not consider standing, 27% considered standing, 6.7% entered the selection process and 4.5% stood for parliamentary election. Of those who signalled their ambition, 15% did not consider standing, 37.5% considered standing, 30% entered the selection process and 17.5% stood for parliament. For those who were both signalled and recruited, the figures were 4% not considered standing, 41.6% considered standing, 29.6% entered the selection process and 24.8% stood as a parliamentary candidate.
5. A marginal effect measures the effect on the conditional mean of y of a change in one of the regressors. In a linear model, the marginal effect equals the slope coefficient but in nonlinear models, this is not the case. This has led to a number of methods for calculating marginal effects. Here we use average marginal effects (AMEs). To get the AME, the marginal effect is first calculated for each individual with their observed levels of covariates. These values are then averaged across all individuals.
6. The baseline probabilities when all independent variables are set at their empirical mean are as follows: not considered standing 36 percentage points; considered standing 44 percentage points; entered selection process 10 percentage points; and stood for Parliamentary election 11 percentage points.

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